Cultivating Meaning in Classroom Communities

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ABSTRACT

Meaning motivates us. In this paper I describe an activity implemented in a university L2 English discussion class with the aim of encouraging students to create meaningfulness in their learning through actively orienting themselves towards, connecting with, and assigning relevance to the topics of discussion lessons. After outlining some principles behind meaningful learning and considering how these might be applied to the context of a discussion class, I detail the creation and trialling of an activity using in-class objects to invite students to direct their attention towards the lesson topic. I also reflect on the effects of this activity on both teacher and student motivation and engagement and consider how a focus on meaning can be beneficial for all participants in learning communities.

INTRODUCTION

At Rikkyo University's Center for English Discussion Class (EDC), students meet once a week for 100 minutes to participate in interactive group discussions and refine skills aimed at improving their spoken communicative competency and fluency in an academic setting. Each lesson is centred around a weekly topic, about which students share their own opinions and views with their classmates and are graded by the instructor on their participation and use of target skills. Students are encouraged (although not required) to express their genuine perspectives on each topic, thereby contributing towards engaging, meaningful, and purposeful discussions. Meaningfulness as a principle is thus highly salient in EDC lessons, and indeed after several semesters teaching as an EDC instructor it has become increasingly apparent that the extent to which it is successfully achieved seems to have effects on both student and teacher enjoyment and motivation.

Meaningful learning and motivation have been included among basic principles of language teaching for some time. Brown (2007) focuses on the benefits to acquisition afforded by the connection of new with existing knowledge in meaningful contexts, leading "toward better long-term retention than rote learning of material in isolated places" (p. 66). Dörnyei (2009) asserts that the Principled Communicative Approach "should be *meaning-focused* and *personally significant* as a whole" (p. 41), a sentiment echoed by Ellis (2014) who claims that "instruction needs to ensure that learners focus predominantly on meaning" (p. 34). The importance of meaningfulness is perhaps not surprising, given its close link to student motivation. Arnold and Murphey (2013) spell this out in their introduction to a volume on the work of language educator Earl Stevick: "if we feel that we are valued and capable, that what we do has meaning and is relevant to our goals and needs, this will lead us to make a greater effort" (p. 1). Research in positive psychology appears to support this, suggesting that having a sense of meaning and motivation may in turn be connected to high learner well-being (Oxford, 2016). Nation and Macalister (2010) also mention the importance of students' motivation, arguing that "as much as possible, learners should be interested and excited about learning the language and […] come to value this learning" (p. 50).

In light of the prominence of meaningfulness as a principle of second language teaching and learning, and of my own observations of its apparent impact on students' motivation, I attempted to design a brief classroom activity to implement in EDC lessons. This was trialled during the Fall semester of the 2019-2020 academic year, with the intent of observing how an intentionally meaning-focused activity may influence the ways that students engage with the

lesson topic, activate their prior knowledge of the subject, and possibly increase meaningfulness in their discussions and learning.

DISCUSSION

What does meaningful learning look like?

In order to consider how a simple activity might affect meaningfulness in a classroom, it is first necessary to ask what is meant by meaningful learning. One perspective is offered by Arnold and Murphey (2013) who, drawing on Stevick's conception of meaningful action, suggest that it can be understood as a combination of relevance (the difference something makes to us, i.e. its significance) and agency (both in terms of the ability one has to control one's behaviour and also to make things relevant to oneself). Relevance and agency are both experienced and enacted in the context of a community or "world of meaningful action", wherein "good learners will strive to make a foreign language more meaningful to themselves" and also "make *themselves* more meaningful to others through using the language", ultimately leading to "a sense of belonging to a new community" (Murphey, 2013, p. 2).

Kristjánsson (2013) gives a concrete example of this by recounting an activity where learners were asked to speak in class about something they did in the previous weekend. On this occasion, a number of students felt comfortable sharing details of serious events that had occurred in their personal lives, openly expressing their emotions to their classmates who responded with support and encouragement in an exchange filled with care, depth and personal significance. As Kristjánsson (2013) explains, one key element of this activity was its positioning of students as "social subjects rather than subjects of language learning" and as "members of a community who have matters of interest to share with each other" (p. 24). This created opportunities for students to exercise agency in the construction of their own social meaning and identity, while language became "first of all a resource for meaningful action, a medium for communicating matters of relevance" (Kristjánsson, 2013, p. 24).

The idea of the classroom as a community where meaningful action occurs fits well with Palmer's (2017) view of the classroom as a "community of truth" (p. 104). In this model, teacher and students gather together in equality oriented towards a central Subject which can be known and engaged with actively. Combining both the precision of a teacher-centred classroom and the active involvement of a student-centred one, this subject-centred model frees all participants to fully experience the "grace of great things", a term borrowed from poet Rainer Maria Rilke (p. 109). In this context, agency, relevance, and even transcendence are possible and welcomed. Oxford (2016), citing Steger, argues that people experience greater meaningfulness when they recognise their own value, skills and qualities, particularly while engaging in actions that transcend their own relationships, religious views and culture (p. 19). If meaningfulness can indeed be enhanced in such classroom communities, what can be done to help create them?

How can learning be made more meaningful?

Given the connection of meaningfulness to personal relevance and agency, it is immediately obvious that meaning by definition cannot be forced upon either teacher or students. It may, however, be indirectly discovered through the invitation to actively focus one's attention on the topic of the lesson, i.e. the Subject or great thing. Palmer (2017) suggests, "the teacher's central task is to give the great thing an independent voice–a capacity to speak its truth quite apart from the teacher's voice in terms that students can hear and understand" (p. 120). Upon hearing its call, all participants in the classroom community are freed to explore and assign significance to the Subject, thereby allowing the conditions for greater meaningfulness to arise.

One point to bear in mind is that this model envisions both teacher and students in active relationship to the Subject, creating meaning individually and collaboratively. It may not be sufficient, then, for the teacher to merely ask students to give their attention to the Subject while remaining unengaged herself. There is a need for the teacher to also cultivate genuine personal interest in the topic so that she is well positioned to guide learners through example into this type of engagement.

In practical terms, the first step towards creating more meaningfulness in the classroom is for teachers to open their eyes and find for themselves what they actually enjoy about the topic, what excites them or interests them, what connections they have to it, what they have to say or share about it. From this place of intention, the teacher can effectively imagine, plan, and prepare lessons where students too are invited to focus on the topic, thereby fostering a dynamic where meaningfulness is valued.

These thoughts are shared by other language educators, such as Nation and Macalister (2010), who recommend "looking at ways to attract [students] and involve them in learning" by "making the subject matter of the lessons relevant and interesting to them" (p. 50). Brown (2007) also suggests capitalizing "on the power of meaningful learning by appealing to students' interests, academic goals and career goals", while introducing new topics in a way that grounds them "in students' existing knowledge and background so that [they become] associated with something they already know" (p. 66). Additionally, Ellis (2014) proposes encouraging students to use language play and make emotional connections as ways of including the subjective aspect of learning in lessons (p. 42). The form that these principles might take after being translated into actual classroom activities and practice will vary greatly depending on specific learning environments and contexts, however in all cases the stance of students and teacher remains the same: active engagement with and attention to the topic, the great thing, that the lesson is about.

The EDC context

Most discussion lessons at Rikkyo University follow a similar structure, in accordance with EDC's unified syllabus. Initially students are asked to complete a short quiz based on their homework reading of a text related to the lesson topic. Next there is generally a fluency-building activity where students are asked to voice their opinions about the topic to several partners, with the aim of increasing their spoken fluency each time. The following lesson stages usually involve the instructor introducing the target discussion skill for the week before allowing time for students to practice this skill, which will be further used in two subsequent group discussions.

Although beginning classes with a topic-based quiz and related fluency activity may in some ways encourage students to focus their attention on the lesson topic, in reality I observed that at times students seemed more concerned about their performance in the quiz and their own ability to speak confidently in front of their peers than with any meaningful engagement with the Subject. There is a certain amount of pressure inherent in starting a class by testing learners' reading comprehension and information retention then asking them to speak at an ever-quickening pace before their classmates. While this may serve as stimulating motivation for some, it also results in the potential for other students to become self-conscious or anxious, shifting their attention away from meaningful communication.

For these reasons I attempted to design an activity that could be introduced in the early stages of the lesson which would invite students to let go of any unhelpful affective factors, such as a preoccupation with their performance, and refocus on the lesson topic and the ways that it may be significant to them. This activity took the form of a short additional lesson stage, added directly after the weekly quiz, where students were presented with an object that was in some way connected to the topic, and a simple question to discuss with their partner. This then led into the

fluency task. By incorporating a physical object, I hoped that students' attention would be drawn towards the reality of the lesson's Subject, while simultaneously activating their relevant previous knowledge, memories and experiences. The details of these objects and how they were used in class are described further below.

PROCEDURE

The activity was trialled in two separate lessons (12-14 classes each) during the 2019-2020 Fall semester, each dealing with different topics and focused on distinct discussion skills. The first instance was in lesson 2, which dealt with The Globalization of Japanese Culture. In this lesson, students are asked to discuss the importance of several types of traditional Japanese culture and then consider which types of pop culture would be appropriate to share with people from other countries. The object for this lesson was a mystery bag of cultural artefacts, mostly things that would be familiar to students from their childhood or school days such as ohajiki, karuta, origami, characters from animation shows, and calligraphy tools. The second trial was conducted in lesson 7, entitled The Influence of the Media. The discussions in this class centred around whether celebrities can be considered good role models and whether various forms of media have positive or negative effects on our lives. The object for this lesson was a photo album containing prints of famous people, mostly recent Japanese sportspeople, TV and film personalities, singers, models and politicians, along with a few foreigners that students may recognize from the music and film world. In both lessons the objects were presented to each table of learners, who were given one to two minutes to open and explore the contents, then three to four minutes to discuss a question that accompanied them.

I considered three elements in the creation of these objects and the accompanying questions: *Engagement*, *Connection*, and *Expansion*. Engagement refers to the way these objects should function as a stimulus for students' senses, memories, and awareness; in other words, does the object evoke interest, wonder, or curiosity? In the case of the mystery bag and photo album, both objects were handed over closed, creating immediate uncertainty and requiring students to open and discover the contents for themselves. Both objects were also physically dynamic, in that students could touch and manipulate them freely and easily.

Connection describes the way that the object should be familiar to students and serve to activate any pre-existing knowledge on the topic. This was primarily achieved through choosing items that would be well within the students' domain of experience, then asking questions that prompted them to reflect on their personal relevance. For lesson 2, the contents of the mystery bag were specifically chosen as representative of common childhood games and activities in Japan, while the prompt question was "Have you used these things? When? Why?". For lesson 7, the celebrities featured in the photo album were chosen with students' knowledge and interests in mind, for example young sports players, singers that students had previously mentioned earlier in the semester, and personalities involved in scandals that had recently been in the news. The question accompanying the photo album was "Which of these celebrities would you like to join this discussion class? Why?".

Expansion relates to how the object, questions, and following lesson stages create opportunities for students to think outside of their own immediate experience and consider the topic in a wider sense, such as its global significance. In both lessons the positioning of the object activity before subsequent lesson stages ensured that students moved from focusing solely on the topic's personal relevance early in the class, to considering other perspectives in the two group discussions. For example, lesson 7 transitioned from the object question "Which of these celebrities would you like to join this discussion class?", to the one of the fluency task questions "If you had children, which celebrities would you introduce to them?", then the first discussion

question “Are famous people mostly good or mostly bad role models?” and a question from the final discussion “Is the media’s effect on society good or bad?”.

VARIATIONS

As mentioned above, this activity was trialled in two lessons that considered Japanese culture and the effects of the media. These lessons were chosen in part due to the ease of creating physical objects related to those topics, and also because of their non-disruptive timing with respect to test and review weeks. However, it would conceivably be possible to include similar activities in other, if not all, discussion classes. Obviously, the specific form of the object and questions would need to be adapted to suit the particular topic of the lesson. In some situations, it may be helpful to provide other forms of stimuli, for instance sounds, images, or stories rather than physical objects. In all cases, ensuring that the activity contains elements of engagement, connection, and expansion would hopefully draw students’ attention onto the topic and help form conditions for greater meaningfulness to emerge.

In a similar way, it may be possible to adapt this activity for use with classes that have lower proficiency levels. The two trials described above were carried out with EDC classes from level I to III, however students from level IV (the lowest proficiency in EDC) could easily participate with a few adjustments such as appropriate grading of the language of the accompanying questions, combination with more explicit instructions, scaffolding, and modelling. Given the amount of L2 performance anxiety I have previously observed in some level 4 classes, I would be especially interested to see what effects a Subject-centring activity such as this one could have on classroom dynamics, student confidence, and overall motivation.

CONCLUSION

The activity described above was designed with the intention of inviting students to engage more fully with the topic of their discussion class in order to promote increased meaningfulness and motivation. Overall, the responses from students seemed positive. For example, upon receiving and opening the mystery bag, many students commented straight away on how they were reminded of their childhood or school days and shared memories with their classmates while answering the question prompts. In response to the photo albums, many students in a number of classes let out enthusiastic expressions of interest. Several also commented on the recentness of the celebrities and many started to immediately share stories and opinions with their classmates. In both trials, students were, on the whole, visibly engaged with the objects and appeared motivated to discuss the topic throughout the ensuing lesson, occasionally referring back to content from the activity stage.

Beyond these observations it is difficult to report exactly to what degree meaningfulness may have been affected in each class. This is partly due to the difficulty in measuring meaningfulness and motivation, especially given that these are often unconsciously experienced phenomena (i.e. one is not usually aware of being motivated, let alone consciously evaluating one’s level of motivation in accordance with a theoretical model, one simply enjoys the moment). There are also cultural aspects to consider, for instance the ways that meaningful engagement, positive affect, and motivation may be observed or self-reported amongst Japanese university students, what factors influence them, and how that may differ from the expectations of teachers or researchers. Exploring possible ways to adequately respond to these issues in data collection may open the door to further research on the efficacy of activities such as the one outlined in this paper.

In addition to considering students’ responses to the activity, I also noticed the effects it had on my own engagement as an instructor. By intentionally orienting myself towards the topics

of each discussion class and spending time considering how this related to my own knowledge and experience during class planning and preparation, I found myself increasingly enjoying the task of monitoring student discussions and experienced a genuine interest in the opinions and perspectives that many of them expressed. Expanding my own background knowledge of the topics and how they may relate to students' lives also enabled me to more deeply understand their approach to each topic and engage with them in class. In some cases, students evidently noticed this and responded positively. Ellis (as cited in Arnold and Murphey, 2013) notes that learners' identities and sense of self can be enhanced when teachers show that they are interested in their students and in their learning, i.e. through teacher confirmation: "the process by which teachers communicate to students that they are endorsed, recognized and acknowledged as valuable, significant individuals" (p. 34).

Developing, trialling, and reflecting on this activity over the course of a semester has served as an interesting exploration of the ways that teachers and students can relate to each other and to the great thing in every lesson. It has become clear to me that intentionality in approaching each topic goes a long way towards creating opportunities for meaningfulness to arise. Incorporating physical objects as a temporary focus of attention can be one helpful way of encouraging students to make connections and assign relevance to the Subject, although it is most certainly not the only way. For instance, a *quietly intense* passion demonstrated by the teacher may have similar effects (see Palmer, 2017). Whatever the means, cultivating classrooms where meaningfulness germinates and thrives can lead to renewed depth, motivation and significance in the learning community.

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